**Christmas Letter 2004**

This year began with a good deal of uncertainty and ended with a feeling of renewed energy. As many of you might remember I didn't win my Kodiak appeal in Zachar Bay until mid February. At that point the guide who lost out had to be given a chance to appeal that decision. He lost his appeal in mid September. I was able to breathe again.

In April I headed for Kodiak looking forward to hunting my old Zachar River country that I had guided in off and on from 1969 through 1992. First up was Terry Lyght the owner of Bulls Eye Sports in Platteville, Wisconsin. Joining us was Jeff Lange, a friend of Terrys', who went along as a packer - this was the second brown bear hunt Jeff has packed on - and next year Jeff is doing his own brown bear hunt with us.

We backpacked up the Zachar River spending three full days hunting Five Mile country before moving up to Ten Mile. We saw some big bear at Five Mile, but two were rubbed pretty good and one that wasn't went over the top instead of coming down. Another, beautifully furred bear was between 9 and 9 1/2 foot but since it was still early in the hunt we kind of reluctantly passed on him.

Those early days of the hunt had the best weather of the trip. Up at Ten Mile it was blustery with frequent rain, but we did see some real big bear. We also made three unsuccessful stalks. The first bear was a 10 footer that lay down in a sucker opening - pulling us into a stalk - even though I didn't think he would stay there very long. He didn't. We got a glimpse of him at 300 yards as he moved into thick alders.

Then we stalked a huge bear twice in three days. This bear looked well over 10 foot, just really impressive. I saw his head through a window in the alders at 200 yards and it looked massive, but we couldn't get a clear shot. This huge guy never moved much, hanging in a jungle of alders and willow, and our only hope was that he would expose himself along one bench where it was open enough to get a shot.

On April 26th with our time winding down we reluctantly decided to go after another bear that looked pretty good but wasn't as big. This other bear was sleeping above a shear gorge that had two waterfalls in it and one concern we had was, if he falls in there, can we retrieve him? We had seen up to 23 mountain goats in it, and a few days earlier had watched another 10 footer chasing them back and forth from one side to the other. We had also seen several other bears in this gorge so a lot had been going on there.

We stalked to within 30 yards of the bear but, believe it or not, Terry couldn't get a shot because of thick brush. We could tell he was big, though, with a blocky, scarred up head. Finally, after considerable contemplation, I snuck down to the lip of the gorge about 50 yards below Terry and Jeff. The bear heard me, got up, and started coming towards me. I talked to the bear trying to get him to move up towards Terry and into the open. He suddenly began huffing, "Hu! Hu! Hu!" and charged! That got me yelling pretty good (I think the bear initially thought I was another bear) and that turned him up slope. Seconds later Terry's 376 Styer went off and then I heard the bear crashing off.

I had warned Terry beforehand to be ready in case the bear popped out the top side of the brush patch. When I heard a second shot two minutes later as I tracked the bear I assumed Terry had shot as the big guy came out the top of the alders where he seemed to be heading. To make a long story shorter, a second bear had come out disturbed by everything that was happening. Terry rightly figured it to be the same bear and killed it on the run with one shot. Unfortunately it was a different bear, a smaller one.

The first bear left a very large track that we were able to follow for about 3/4's of a mile before losing it. He'd been hit, but there was reason to be optimistic for his survival.

On our way down river we had a frightening experience. I had all three packs in a tiny four pound pack raft. Terry's pack was on top and when it started sliding off as I tried to feed the boat around a stump Terry lunged to grab it and before you could catch a breath he was in water over his head fighting to stay up. He grabbed onto a log lodged in the river but the current prevented him from pulling himself out. I jumped in to help him and ended up in the same predicament. We both eventually went underneath the log and were able to right ourselves in shallower water downstream. It was a scare. Terry was a little hypothermic after getting out. Jeff had made a superman leap from shore onto the log that Terry's pack lodged against and was able to drag it up onto the log. He was trapped out there for awhile until I was able to use the boat to get him back to shore. No real harm was done, but it took us three rainy hours with a big fire to get mostly dried out, and it was a reminder of how fragile life is; how quickly you can lose it. It was an adventure.

On the May hunts Andy Hawk guided one of our past clients Dave Olsen from Chester, New York. Dave's brother in law Jimmy Muth came along to pack. Andy later said that Jimmy was a pretty good packer. They headed up Zachar River while my client Carl Baker from Wick, West Virginia and my son Kiche and I headed up Little Zachar. Where the April hunt was dominated by cold rain and wind, the May hunts had some 70 degree days. Bring em on.

Carl, Kiche and I hunted the first few days without seeing much, one single bear and several sows and cubs; mostly we were seeing deer and mountain goats. In the valley known as "Little Zachar" the main stream feeding it comes in from the east at an elevation of 1000 feet, and if you want to hunt it you often need snowshoes. I call this high valley Pallansch Creek and I knew from hunting it years ago that it was a very good place for big bear.

On May 3rd we established a spike camp at 1000 feet where Pallansch Creek plunges down into a canyon leading to Zachar Bay. Along the way we discovered the skeleton of a very large Kodiak bear that had died sometime in the past year. He had rough teeth and was missing one canine tooth altogether (root and all). The skull measured 29 inches! I've been looking to find a huge skull like this for the last 35 years. What a find!

On May 4th we planned a long day trip back in, packing snowshoes just in case. Early in the day Kiche spotted a bear cruising around a slope a couple miles up ahead. We thought he was big, but heat waves prevented us from being sure. It was a very hot day. As we got closer to the area where we'd seen the bear earlier we spotted him laying in alders in the snow. He looked pretty big laying there, but it wasn't until 7:00 that he finally got up and showed us that yes, he was pretty big - I guessed close to 10 foot - and that he had a very good hide. Once he started moving he headed up like he was going over the top. Damn! I quickly dug out my predator call and started screaming on it. That made him stop and look down into the valley, a few minutes later he lay down.

Up we went, plowing snow all the way, as fast as we could climb. It took us awhile to figure a way to close the final distance, but when we did we got to within about 50 yards. Carl was ready with his vintage pre 64 Winchester Model 70 300Holland and Holland magnum. He was shooting 180 grain barnes X bullet handloads and put the big guy down with his first shot, and then finished him with several follow up shots. The bear was a beautiful animal, and it was said best by Carl himself, "I feel kind of sad that we got him. I mean, I'm happy, don't get me wrong, but I hope I'm worthy."

It was just before dark and we were a very long way from camp so we retreated down to a gravel bar at the creek and siwashed the night. Carl was so wired he walked long looping circles in the twilight to calm back down. He had just killed a heck of a bear. A driftwood fire eased the night's cold, but we were plenty happy to see daylight again.

The next day Kiche earned his pay packing the 10 foot hide off the mountain side and back to camp. He had to use snowshoes for aways and he went down at least eight or ten times. Exhausting work. The skull went exactly 27 inches.

Meanwhile, Dave had knocked down a real nice bear up at Ten Mile on the Zachar River. They had seen many bears up there but were hampered by high water due to the hot weather melting the snow. The river had gotten so high they could hardly cross it. I talked to my Air Taxi, Sea Hawk, on my sat phone and found that the lake known as 629 was thawed out in Brown's Pass so Andy, Dave and Jimmy were able to pack up to there and fly out from there. Dave's bear squared out at 9 feet 5 inches with a 25 1/2" skull.

Due to the uncertainties early in the year I hadn't made much of an effort to fill out my fall hunts and as a consequence ended up guiding a sheep hunter for another outfitter this past September. This was a Chugach State Park hunt just east of Anchorage. Ron Pitts from Clifton, Virginia was my client and we had a packer on loan from the Air Force to help carry the load. Our packer's name was Bob Marshall and he was on his first sheep hunt having been transferred to Elmendorf Air Force Base the previous year.

As it turned out we made a good team. Our motto was, "slow but steady". It wasn't the easiest sheep hunt in that we had to climb over a mountain to get into the valley we intended to hunt. It was about a 2500 foot climb and we made 1700 feet of that the first day, scouted and rested on the second day, and made it over the top and down into Thunderbird Creek the third day.

From there we broke camp again and went around into the Middle Fork of Thunderbird Creek and on up to its' headwaters. We saw over a hundred sheep on this hunt, but the rams were spooky and hanging high. On the sixth day we made our only stalk when we had a choice of one old looking ram by himself or two other similar sized rams in a group of eleven. After a climb that took us nearly to the top of the mountain Ron was able to kill the lone ram. This was, quite possibly, the oldest ram I've guided for as he aged out at 12 1/2 years. He was a little skinny. He had lost some teeth and those that were left didn't look too good. He also had a nasty infection in his nut sack that was full of green puss. He had - as the saying goes - seen better days. The ram had a nice heavy horn that carried its' weight out into the tip at about 36 inches. The other side was broomed off at 31 1/2 inches.

It took us another three days to get back out. We just took it slow - in steps - and we ended up having a good time on a tough hunt. Not too long after we got back I heard that Bob had been sent to Iraq so our thoughts and prayers have been with him.

I wasn't able to do much hunting myself this fall, but I did manage to get a fork-horned bull moose on Castle Mountain behind my house. I hadn't hunted that spot before and was surprised to see six bull moose in 1 1/2 days of hunting. One of these was about 55 inches, but I was a little slow reacting. Later on Kodiak I bagged a couple of does with my 375 bear gun. Mighty fine eating.

My client on Kodiak this fall was Michael Gleason of Berlin, Massachusetts. Mike had killed a pretty good bear with me four years ago, now he was looking for something real big. My son Kiche was packing and on October 23rd we headed up the Zachar River. We wouldn't see base camp again for seventeen days.

The weather beat us up; rain, snow and two strong wind storms, one of which got up around 100m.p.h. The wind knocked down trees all around base camp and tore three rips in our main tent. A tree flattened the gear tent. Up in the valley we were camped in a well protected bowl low on the side of a mountain, but we could hear wind gusts screeching across a ridge five hundred yards above. It made you nervous.

We fought the weather first with patience, then stoicism, and finally acclimation. We saw plenty of bears and almost got a couple in the 9 1/2 to 10 foot class. On day fourteen of Mike's permit and sixteen days out from base we were ready to burn some bridges. Right from the start Mike had told me he'd love to track a bear down in the snow. So that morning we headed out to the river and immediately cut a very large track. At nightfall the previous day it had begun snowing and the snow ended just before daylight that morning, and since the big bear's tracks showed an inch of snow in them we knew he had been looking for salmon at night. As we followed his tracks we came across another very large track with snow in it. My thinking is the largest bears only fish at night. We kept at it and ran into a hugely fat 8 1/2 footer at 30 yards. We let her pass. Eventually the track headed up the mountain side. I told Mike to turn his scope to its' lowest setting and be ready for instant action. After 30 minutes of slow, careful climbing we met the monster rising from his bed at 12 yards! There wasn't much to aim at, just a massive neck and head looming overhead through snow draped branches. Mike broke the bears' neck with a single 180 grain nosler partition out of his 30/06. Anticlimactic? Maybe, but we were very thankful never the less.

The bear was huge, tying Bob Conyers' bear for the biggest bodied of my career at 10 feet 6 inches (11'3" wide X 9'9" long). He stretch squared 11' 2". The skull went 28".

Kiches' pack weighed in the neighborhood of 140 to 150 pounds on the trip out. A brutal load. Along the way we cut the track of another monster two miles from the bay. Its' tracks were as large as the bear we got. Out at base we found tracks from a 9 1/2 footer and a 10 footer on the beach by camp. This isn't the easiest place to hunt on the island, but boy, it sure has the bears.

When Mike and Kiche headed home my wife Donna came down for a week and we built our first structure on the land we own there - an outhouse.

Looking towards the future my bear hunts are booked for 05 and 06. I have openings for spring 07. I'm planning to do Kodiak goat hunts. Through next year it's a drawing hunt and I have a couple of people who've applied for next year's hunt. After 05 I've been told that it will be a Registration hunt, which basically means anyone that wants to hunt goat, can. Kodiak goats have a reputation for getting big, and in the Zachar Bay area there are a couple of high lakes that will put us up above the brush line making for easier access. I'm planning to do two sheep hunts next fall. I have one of these still open for anyone interested. I also plan to do one moose hunt. I've got a person interested in the moose hunt, but give me a call in January if you're interested in moose. I plan to do one moose hunt a year.

We hope everything is going well for all our friends out there and we wish you all the best in the New Year. This year's Christmas card is a photo I took up on Castle Mountain while moose hunting in September. He's not small enough to be a legal spike fork, or big enough to be a legal 50 inch spread.

Until next year.